

What is “Best Practice” Instruction and Assessment in a 21st Century World?*

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The Essential Features of “Best Practice” Instruction and Assessment in an Era 3, 21st Century World

After a review of the literature on best practice instruction and assessment, and after discussion with many educators, the following five key areas were identified as critical for an Era 3, 21st century educational program:

- Teach to and plan from a few essential learning goals
- Build a success-oriented learning environment
- Facilitate successful learning through “best” instructional practice
- Use assessments to promote high performance levels
- Support professional growth and self-reflection (create professional learning communities)

Each area incorporates characteristics of successful 21st century schools and classrooms. Each of these areas and their characteristics are discussed in some detail in the rest of this article.

1. Teach to and plan from a few essential learning goals

A key feature of best practice instruction is that teachers continually focus on a few selected essential learning goals at any one time that promote deeper learning and understanding -- big ideas, understandings, essential questions, key processes, habits of mind -- as the major focus of their planning and instructional process. As they teach and plan from essential learning goals, they:

- Derive essential learning goals from many sources, including standards.
- Focus essential learning goals on fundamental understandings-concepts, theories, principles, generalizations.
- Focus essential learning goals on fundamental skills/processes, such as communication, thinking, research, problem solving, application of knowledge, interpersonal development.
- Focus essential learning goals on “habits of mind”, such as curiosity and perseverance.
- Use essential learning goals to plan key assessments and instructional practices.

Teachers use essential learning goals to help them focus their units and lessons. Effective teachers who work from standards “unpack” them, in order to focus their energies on three types of essential learning goals—critical concepts and understandings, key processes and skills, and habits of mind. For example, effective teachers translate content standards into critical concepts and understandings that fit with the units that they are teaching. They also adapt the processes and skills found in content standards to be consistent with their subject areas and their own classroom goals. Finally, they pay attention to developing the habits of mind that students need in order to be successful (Costa and Kallick, 2000). An effective 21st century teacher identifies core concepts,

understandings, processes and skills, and habits of mind, and uses these goals to plan an instructional program.

Effective teachers who work from content standards use them to help identify and/or develop the performance standards that demonstrate mastery and success. What criteria are used to judge success? What types of student work demonstrate success? Effective teachers identify criteria for success, sometimes in the form of a “list” of expected characteristics, sometimes in the form of a rubric, and they share criteria and successful work with students and parents.

Finally, effective teachers use both essential learning goals and performance standards to help them plan assessments and instructional practices. They use a backward design planning model (Wiggins and McTighe, 2004) to identify valid, aligned assessments that assure mastery of key academic and habits of mind goals, and then design instructional practices in order to assure that students master the goals.

2. Build a Success–Oriented Learning Environment

A critical element in teaching to high standards and expectations is the development of a classroom environment that increases the probability of success. Teachers who develop success-oriented learning environments:

- Communicate clear expectations and learning goals.
- Appropriately challenge all students.
- Provide students with help and assistance when necessary.
- Celebrate the successes of students and provide incentives and encouragement to students as they work towards meeting high standards.
- Motivate students to learn.
- Create a community of learners.
- Encourage students to take responsibility for their learning.

Effective 21st century teachers do more than exhort students to work hard. They provide students with clear expectations of what it is that they are expected to know and do to be successful, what the tasks will be that demonstrate that success, and what the criteria is for success. These teachers share and compare models of excellent, good and poor work to illustrate the differences and explain expectations concretely. A good indicator of effective instructional practice is whether all students in a class can identify and clearly explain specific expectations for success, and whether they can identify excellent, good and poor quality work.

Students are also appropriately challenged through “deep learning” activities in a success oriented learning environment. The learner has the attitude and perception that they are working hard to meet significant challenges. This often means that the learner is asked to focus on important questions, to solve challenging problems, to conduct research, to think

critically and creatively, to explore ideas in depth, to write and reflect on significant issues, to produce quality work, or to persist in creating long-term projects.

Students are encouraged to succeed and receive appropriate assistance, help and support. Frequent feedback is given to students. They are provided with opportunities to improve their work on a regular basis. The teacher often keeps track of progress by using wall charts, checklists, contracts, or traditional quizzes and tests. Drafts of student writing or projects are reviewed and feedback given in a timely manner. Successful student work is placed in portfolios and put on display. Students have the opportunity to work with each other and mentor each other when appropriate. If the work is difficult and challenging for some students, the teacher uses alternative instructional approaches. When a major achievement occurs for all students, the entire class celebrates together.

Teachers who build a success oriented learning environment pay attention to student motivation and building a community of learners. Rogers, Ludington and Graham (1998) suggest six criteria for maximizing student motivation for learning in a classroom: safety, caring, value, involvement, success, and enabling. A motivating teacher helps learners to understand the value and relevance of learning goals. Students are involved in the learning process through interactive learning strategies. Effective teachers demonstrate genuine concern about their students, and help students see themselves as successful by reinforcing small, continuous improvements over time. They provide a safe learning environment in which students are willing to take psychological risks, they design an environment in which students feel cared for, and they foster the habits of mind that enable students to be successful. These are powerful characteristics found in classrooms where students are motivated to achieve and be successful.

Success-oriented teachers encourage students to become a community of learners. In these environments, students work cooperatively and collaboratively. Students are encouraged to help and support each other. A community of learners is something that an observer can usually sense quickly by the tone and atmosphere of the class and by how students and teachers relate to each other. Building a community of learners takes time, but usually pays off in higher levels of learning and achievement.

Finally, in a success-oriented environment, students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning. There are usually some “fail-safe” mechanisms in place that enable students to take risks, try new ways of doing things, without penalty. With multiple opportunities for revision, students are able to improve their work before it really counts. There is an “I can do it” quality that permeates classroom life, and students know that academic risks will be understood and encouraged.

3. Facilitate successful learning through “best” instructional practice

Good instructional practice is often differentiated by grade levels, types of students, subject area and the personality of the teacher. Yet teachers who follow some general

instructional practice guidelines increase the probability of student success. These teachers:

- Focus instruction on mastering essential learning goals and assessments, including performance tasks.
- Provide students with the reasons why the work they do is important for them and for their future.
- Set clear criteria for success and share them with students and parents.
- Diagnose knowledge and skill levels prior to instruction.
- Use “advanced organizers” and “summarizer” activities on a regular basis.
- Promote interactive student learning by using a variety of instructional methods, such as interactive reading, elaborative writing, discussions, projects, “real world” activities, interactive notebooks, and the like.
- Integrate appropriate and effective technology practices into instruction.
- Encourage student questions, ideas and opinions in classroom activities.
- Use multiple materials (not only a textbook) where possible and when appropriate.
- Assist students who are having difficulties by explaining concepts in different ways, making sure that students understand difficult ideas, and so on.
- Provide advanced students with enrichment activities.
- Communicate with parents when students are doing well as well as when students are having difficulties, and providing parents/guardians with ways to help their children attain success.
- Help students learn complex ideas logically, over time.

The probability of success is immeasurably increased when a teacher ties instruction to essential learning goals and significant assessments, when he or she provides students with reasons for doing the work, and when students understand what is expected of them. Often a characteristic of poor classroom instruction is the student’s perception of purposelessness. When students are asked why they are doing their assignments, they often shrug their shoulders and look with a blank stare. It is more likely that significant learning will take place when a teacher ties learning to significant goals, can explain and demonstrate to students why they are learning, clarifies his or her expectations, and helps students succeed.

While there are no “magic bullet, best practice” instructional strategies, several types of strategies increase the probability of higher levels of achievement. The use of activators, or advanced organizers, has been demonstrated to increase achievement levels (Marzano, Pickering and Pollock, 2001, pp. 117-120, Saphier and Haley, 1993 a). Activators help learners bring previously learned knowledge and skills to the forefront, and often create an interest in learning. Similarly, the use of summarizers or closure activities helps the learner to create connections and patterns, to apply knowledge to new situations, and to prepare for new learning (Saphier and Haley, 1993 b). Research by Marzano, Pickering and Pollock (2001) indicates that a number of specific types of strategies increase the likelihood of higher levels of student achievement, such as graphic organizers, cooperative learning, strategies that identify similarities and differences, and strategies

that generate and test hypotheses. Higher level questioning that promotes deeper learning, and the use of “wait time” when asking questions, promotes higher achievement levels (Marzano, Pickering and Pollock, pp. 113-114). Regular use of writing strategies enable students to reflect on their work, to communicate and express themselves, to state opinions, and to clarify their thoughts. The use of “best practice” strategies in each subject area improves achievement (Zemelman, Daniels and Hyde, 1998). Assignments that promote “authentic”, real world problem solving and projects motivate students, enable them to pursue their interests, foster research, investigation, and a variety of types of presentations, and encourage creativity and innovation.

Many advocates of effective instructional practice suggest less direct textbook teaching and a greater focus on multiple sources of materials and the use of computers. The use of primary source materials, award winning literature, computer simulations, and the like, make learning more challenging and meaningful.

In schools geared to 21st century learning, project or problem-based learning strategies are frequently used. Teachers develop projects around essential questions related to their subject areas (which are often interdisciplinary in nature). Students conduct research, write reports, develop multi-media presentations, communicate results on websites, build portfolios of their work (which become a key to assessment). This type of learning is central to schools that have developed programs to meet 21st century goals.

Tomlinson (1999) suggests that differentiating instruction also promotes higher levels of learning. Students are more appropriately challenged when the learning is geared to their skill levels. The use of differentiated instructional strategies increases the probability of success for all students.

Finally, providing parents and guardians with information as to how to help students be successful is an important tool for increased achievement. Parents and guardians are more likely to support a teacher’s programs when they are provided with information about learning goals, assignments, expectations and grading policies. Enlisting parent assistance to assure that students cooperate in class and complete their assignments helps to foster success. Strengthening the connection between school and home helps to promote higher achievement levels.

4. Use Assessments To Promote High Performance Levels

The “traditional” teacher generally uses a “test” at the end of the unit, chapter, or course as the key classroom assessment device. The test is usually in the form of fragmented, decontextualized questions -- multiple choice, fill in the blanks, and/or a short essay. After the test is given, the teacher grades it, reviews it with the students and then moves on – to the next unit, chapter, or course. In traditional classrooms, a project is often treated as an assignment to be completed and a grade assigned. The traditional teacher usually does not provide students with clear criteria for success or feedback or revision opportunities.

In the traditional classroom, assessments are treated as a “mystery”. “Study everything” is the test attitude in many traditional classrooms. Anything from the class can be on the test, important or not. For many students, it is a mystery as to what they are supposed to know and be able to do for the test. The teacher sees his or her role as “sorting” students into those who “get it” and those who don’t. The teacher’s role is to present information and conduct activities – student failure is a result of the student not working hard enough or taking responsibility for his or her learning.

Assessments in 21st century oriented classrooms are viewed very differently. Teachers expect all students to master learning, to become proficient in their work, and thus to complete the assessment successfully. They therefore go out of their way to share clear expectations with students. They make their learning expectations explicit. More specifically, they:

- Use a variety of types of assessments tied to essential goals and expectations for success.
- Design open-ended "performance" assessments and other alternative assessments that allow for complex answers and promote the development of quality student work.
- Share information about assessments with students and parents.
- Frequently share examples of excellent, proficient and unsatisfactory work.
- Use portfolios – collections of student work - as part of the learning and assessment process.
- Monitor student progress and success and provide feedback and suggestions for improvements before a final product is completed.
- Use assessments to help monitor and plan instruction.
- Provide students with multiple opportunities to improve the quality of their work.
- Promote student participation in designing the assessment process.
- Incorporate student self-assessments and peer assessments into the learning process.

Essential learning goals and criteria for success are communicated to students – and assessments are closely tied to the learning goals and criteria for success. The teacher shares with students a clear perspective on what constitutes success. When asked, students can communicate the goals of learning and what is expected of them.

Complex projects and performance tasks are commonplace alongside the more traditional tests and quizzes. There are more opportunities for students to apply their learning to authentic tasks and projects.

Teachers share information more frequently about learning goals and the variety of assessments with students and parents. They make time to hold classroom conferences with students to review student work and progress. Teachers send home student work for review by parents, and conferences with parents enable teachers and parents to review student work and discuss student progress towards meeting learning goals.

Teachers work collaboratively to analyze examples of student work and determine what constitutes work that is advanced, proficient and satisfactory. They share examples of “anchor papers” with students and parents. A teacher may spend some time reviewing these examples with students, explaining why some work is better than others, and why other work might not meet satisfactory criteria. Students often place their work in portfolios, sometimes selecting out their best work to illustrate how well they are doing in meeting the teacher’s criteria for success.

Effective teachers monitor student work, giving feedback and providing opportunities for students to revise and improve their work. They also monitor the progress of students in other areas, such as completion of assignments, progress on meeting goals, and the like. They continually monitor student progress and help students meet learning goals and performance expectations. The data from these assessments are also used to help teachers assess their own instructional approaches and to revise their plans accordingly.

Finally, effective teachers often give students opportunities to participate in the development of assessments and/or criteria for success. There are also opportunities for students to reflect on their learning and to self-assess their own work. This enables students to develop the metacognitive skills necessary to analyze their own work and to understand the assessment process.

5. Support Professional Growth and Self-Reflection (create professional learning communities)

A fifth characteristic of effective teachers in a 21st century world is that they make continual efforts to improve what they do in order to increase student achievement. They do not blame students for their lack of success – rather, they are constantly challenging themselves to find ways to improve classroom and instructional practices in order to increase learning and achievement. Effective teachers improve their skills because they regularly and frequently:

- Use district, school, classroom and student data to improve instruction
- Develop alternative ways to solve classroom and student problems
- Examine new ideas and design innovative classroom experiences.
- Work collaboratively with other professionals in all of the above areas.

These teachers regularly use a variety of data to help solve instructional problems. They analyze district-wide data to determine strengths and improve problem areas. Classroom and student data, in the form of student work and surveys, help teachers to identify student learning difficulties. Effective teachers are continually learning and examining new ideas, selecting those that have potential for improved learning, and trying them out in their classrooms. They work collaboratively with other teachers and educators, often in teams, to share problems, challenges, and ideas for improvement. In “21st century” schools, learning communities include all professional educators working collaboratively as well as the students working collaboratively in order to improve and increase learning.

Using This Instructional Framework for Supervision and Professional Growth

These five areas and their characteristics -- teach to and plan from essential learning goals, build a success oriented learning environment, facilitate successful learning through effective and engaging instructional practice, use assessments to promote high performance levels, and support professional growth and self-reflection – provide the basic foundation for a “best practices” supervision model. The model is designed to promote teacher growth, not solely to evaluate teachers. It also assumes that observing teachers in a single lesson provides little insight into teaching, and that a broader approach is needed to support the development of effective instruction.

The “best practices” supervision model encourages a reflective approach. A teacher and supervisor individually rate the teacher, together examine a teacher’s strengths and problem areas, and then, based on this analysis, decide together on worthy goals for the teacher’s professional growth. Classroom observations then focus on the selected professional growth goals. The complete model, with directions, the rating system, and descriptions of each indicator, can be obtained by logging on to our website – www.era3learning.org.

Conclusion

With many years of observations, study and discussions, the author has developed an instruction and supervision model for a 21st century classroom that focuses on the following five areas—teach to and plan from essential learning goals, build a success-oriented learning environment, facilitate successful learning through “best” instructional practice, use assessments to promote high performance levels, and support professional growth and self-reflection (create professional learning communities). Teachers who score at high levels in these areas work from learning goals that are more focused and “essential”, plan “backwards” from key learning goals, develop and share with students clear, high expectations, and tie assessments and instructional practices more closely to learning goals. Instructional strategies and assessments are performance based, engaging, and motivating. “In-depth” activities and tasks are a major part of the instructional program. Teachers support the success and achievement of all students through formative assessments and opportunities to redo student work.

These characteristics go beyond a new movement or a quick fix for education – they suggest some important, enduring qualities of classrooms and instruction. They should help to provide for better teaching and learning in a 21st century world.

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